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Out of the Attic

Robert Prettyman and Friendship Firehouse's hose carriage

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National Fire Prevention Week is observed from Oct. 9 to 16, in memory of the Great Chicago Fire of 1871. This year marks the 100th anniversary of the first National Fire Prevention Week, which was observed in 1922.

On Feb. 25, 1858, the Alexandria Gazette wrote, "Mr. R. F. Prettyman has just finished at his factory on Pitt Street, a new hose carriage for the Friendship Fire Company of this City which for the beauty of design and substantial workmanship cannot be surpassed in the country." Prettyman's hose carriage, newly restored to look as it did in the late 1850s, is on display at the Friendship Firehouse Museum at 107 S. Alfred St. The museum will be open Oct. 15 to culminate Fire Prevention Week, which celebrates its 100th anniversary Oct. 9 to 15.

Carriage maker Robert F. Prettyman was a member of Alexandria's Friendship Fire Company. Born in 1821, Prettyman joined his father's business in 1842. Robert's father was also a member of Friendship Fire Company. Prettyman lived and worked on Pitt Street, between King and Cameron, making coaches and carriages, selling used coaches and carriages and doing repairs.

With Friendship Fire Company, Prettyman attained the rank of engineer, the most prestigious position in the company. His job was to maintain the engines and make sure they stayed in good working order. In 1858, he was also Friendship's president and was a delegate to the city's Fireman's Convention.

Though a member of the Friendship Fire Company, Prettyman also built a hose carriage for the city's Sun Fire Company. He built Sun's carriage in 1857, a year before building the Friendship carriage. An article in the Alexandria Gazette noted that, "for beauty of design, neatness of finish and substantial work, is not to be excelled at any factory in the United States." When Prettyman delivered the new carriage, the Sun Fire Company marched it through several of the city's streets before taking it to their fire house.

Prettyman was active elsewhere in the community as well. He was an officer in the Mount Vernon Guards and a member of the International Order of Odd Fellows fraternal and service organization. He was one of the managers of the annual Birth Night Ball celebrating George Washington's birthday. An active member of the Whig party, he was a delegate to the Whig national convention held in Philadelphia in 1848, though he declined to run for office himself – City Council – in 1853.

Friendship Fire Company, established in 1774, was the oldest of five volunteer fire companies in Alexandria. Like all fire companies, they sought the best and most innovative equipment available to fight fires. In the mid-19th century, hose carriages, like the ones built by Prettyman, were a technological



Prettyman's hose carriage is on display at the Friendship Firehouse Museum. Photo/Historic Alexandria.



Office of Historic Alexandria City of Alexandria, Virginia

advancement. Long hoses replaced bucket brigades as more efficient ways to supply a steady stream of water from wells and cisterns.

The hose carriage was also ornately painted and decorated. The Alexandria Gazette article notes, "The ornaments are all plated work, except two portraits. The one on the right being Benjamin Thomas, late President of the Company (1855) and the other on the left, James W. Keene, a member of the Company killed at the fire on King Street (Dowell Store), November 17, 1855. On the front are two bells with a large lump of stained glass with the date of the organization 1774 cut in the glass, over which stands a miniature fireman in full dress. On the rear is the name Friendship, NO. 1 beautifully engraved." (The stained glass was later replaced.)

Friendship Firehouse Museum will be open 11 a.m. to 5 p.m. on Oct. 15, offering an opportunity to admire the "beauty of design and substantial workmanship" of the restored hose carriage that Robert Prettyman built 164 years ago. Admission is \$2 and free to Alexandria residents.

"Out of the Attic" is published each week in the Alexandria Times newspaper. The column began in September 2007 as "Marking Time" and explored Alexandria's history through collection items, historical images and architectural representations. Within the first year, it evolved into "Out of the Attic" and featured historical photographs of Alexandria.

These articles appear with the permission of the Alexandria Times and were authored by staff of the Office of Historic Alexandria and invited guests.